

The Road Not Taken. Granite. Ordos City. Inner Mongolia, China.



Concept

The title for this sculpture is taken from the Robert Frost poem of the same name and written in 1916 shortly after he moved to the UK from his native USA. The poem has interesting ambiguities and reflections on life, depending on if you read it in your twenties, or later...

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

By Robert Frost.

The poem comments on notions of choice and declares that choice is inevitable, but argues that one can never know the consequences of choice until one has lived it. Interestingly, the poem speaks of a “yellow” wood, revealing that it was probably written in the autumn. Yellow is considered a colour that represents happiness and contentment, along with hope, friendship and perseverance. In this sense, the poem is *perhaps* talking about notions of inspiration.

My sculpture is homage to this poem and a reflection of the choices people make in life. The use of navigational forms in this granite artwork is a metaphor for direction and locale. It is about where we are as people, both emotionally and geographically: it is also about *where* we see ourselves, and *how* we are perceived.

The duality of both the poem and the sculpture are about making decisions, (human motivation), but also about the art of indecision.

Background



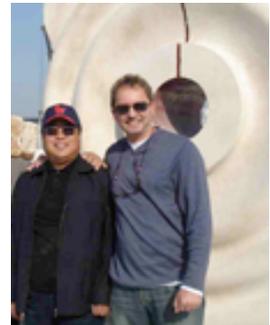
The commissioning of the Ordos City sculpture came about because of my involvement in making a signature sculpture for the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

The initial open competition for the Olympic opportunity attracted more than 2600 applicants worldwide. Eventually, a shortlist was drawn-up and an exhibition of proposals for “One World-One Dream” was assembled at the Beijing Municipal Gallery Buildings in Beijing where my proposal, “Strange Meeting” was chosen for a prestige space in Olympic Park, together with 25 other sculptors selected from the initial global application.



Most of my output up until that point had been very broad based and I had specified that the sculpture should be fabricated in metal. A suggestion came back from the organizers that I might want to think about using granite or marble. I wasn't keen on the idea at first, because I had never used natural stone and was concerned about the sheer volume of the project, its mass and my technical ability to make it work!

Once in China and having the opportunity to view the resources available to me, I changed my mind and thought it was worthwhile taking the risk. Linguistics were initially a problem, but my ability to communicate with quick sketches as well as a scale model helped a great deal. I was also fortunate to eventually meet up with an interpreter who could speak fluent Mandarin as well as English. This was the turning point in the development of the project because I was able to convey the subtleties of my ideas to Mr. Chen (the owner of the stone workshop) and get the appropriate stone for the sculpture. The process of making the sculpture was also important; the 2-part sculpture was necessarily hewn from one block of marble and the line that separated one half from the other became the articulation point where both forms reflected their twin-identity.



Strange Meeting is huge two-part sculpture, being 3m square of 27 tons of flesh coloured marble, cut from a single piece, sourced from a Chinese quarry which is the size of Wembley stadium. One part of the sculpture is upright, the other supine. The distinctive manila colouring and shape of the work echo the characteristics of garment templates that inspired the design. They are instantly identifiable with the contours of the body: therefore, the sculpture is derived from the human figure but is not *obviously* figurative.

The title of this award winning work, *Strange Meeting*, is taken from Wilfred Owen's famous WW1 poem of the same name in which the poet speaks of a “vision” or dream-like experience in which he meets a soldier whom he fought against in the previous day's battle. The confrontation stirs the poet to utter the dramatic statement, “I am the enemy you killed, my friend”
The “enemy/friend” paradox tilts the poem's theme of conflict towards reconciliation, reinforced by the soft, concluding line that suggests the soldiers have put their differences to rest, “Let us sleep now...”

For me, the poem fitted hand-in-glove with the general Olympic ideal of uniting friend and foe across the globe - albeit through sport - and with the Beijing catch phrase in particular of "One World – One Dream". Bearing in mind the differences between East-West cultures that have led to challenges from Westminster and Washington to China's human rights' record, this two-part sculpture also acts as a metaphor for the strange meetings between East-West politicians and sportsmen that the dawning of 08-08-08 heralded. Strange Meeting remains in place, opposite the Birds Nest Stadium and has attracted a lot of critical attention.

The Road Not Taken

The Road Not Taken has sprung from this interest in the work made in Beijing and I have worked with the same stone-carving factory to make this new sculpture for Ordos City.



Working with the same team has meant that there has been a welcome continuity of understanding as a great many communication problems were ironed-out with my first departure in using natural stone in 2008.

The forms of the sculpture are derived from a variety of navigation instruments, which are integral to my interest in the "Found Object" tradition in contemporary fine art practice, as well as objects that elucidate on the innovative capacity of humankind. I have amassed a number of drawings of a variety of such science-based influences, gathered from museums and archive collections across the globe.



The early phase of this commission was through a personal contact I have in China who alerted me to this opportunity. The sculpture in Olympic Park Beijing had received widespread media attention, so the commissioner *Prof Zhang He* was aware of my work and invited me to submit a proposal for this new International Sculpture Park. The starting point of this new Sculpture Park was to involve the commissioning of 30 invited artists from across the world.

The making of the sculpture



The atmosphere of the workshop where the sculpture was made, in Beijing, is quite remarkable: the scale of the resource is monumental and the energy of the Chinese workforce makes for a stimulating environment. Noise and dust intermingle with the frenetic activity of a workforce marshalled to specific tasks dependent on their skills. Colossal saws scythe through gigantic blocks of granite and elsewhere highly skilled carvers finesse designs that demand the most dextrous of handling. Mr Chen is the owner of the workshop and his bellowing tones can be heard throughout the factory as he cycles around monitoring the progression of works.

The carvers worked from a scale model I had produced in London and were busy scaling up the sculpture, when to my surprise, the suggestion was made to make the sculpture in a unique (but as I later found out, tried and tested) method that involved cladding granite

to a steel armature. I had initially thought that the sculpture would be made in sections and then resin-pinned together. However, Mr Chen had made this suggestion and showed me examples of other monumental artworks that were made using a similar method. As the attached pictures demonstrate, the framework for the sculpture was simple, but the steel armature had to be carefully constructed in order to align each section to the granite panels. It was then a question of fitting each granite slab to the armature. The critical part of the work was making sure that the edges of each granite slab were perfect, so that seam lines were discreet. As the main body of the work progressed, it was time to select another contrasting granite for details of the sculpture: these were carved from solid block and then resin anchored into place onto the main body of the sculpture.



From here in the UK I now have the problem of making sure the sculpture will be located correctly in the space where it will be exhibited. This will engender a lot of email correspondence with my friends in China to make sure that the orientation of the sculpture is correct. Hopefully the initial maquette, and advice so far, will ensure the success of this final phase of the project.

Pictures of the process of making the sculpture



John Atkin FRBS

The completed sculpture in Ordos City. 2010



Pictures of Strange Meeting. Olympic Park, Beijing 2008

